

# Karma Yoga and the Gunas

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2016-09-17

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/2917>

**Lulu:** Dear James, I was dreaming of you! ☺

You told me something very important, but when I woke up, I couldn't remember it anymore...

Maybe that is a small metaphor for our Vedanta weekend. The days after I felt the truth and being the self was very light, and now as time goes by I forget more and more, and it's getting heavy again. So I started reading your book now!

**Sundari:** Hello, Lulu. James asked me to reply on his behalf, as he is swamped at the moment. Vedanta is a difficult and counter-intuitive teaching which will challenge everything you previously thought you knew about yourself. Ignorance is hardwired and tenaciously resistant; *rajas* and *tamas* will keep the mind projected outwards (*rajas*) or under a cloud of dullness (*tamas*) until self-knowledge obtains. It is common for most inquirers that the knowledge "comes and goes" at first. We call this the "firefly" stage. All the qualifications for *moksa* must be present in the mind for self-knowledge to stick – permanently. Essence lays out the whole teaching methodology employed in Vedanta, but there is also a progression in the texts, which go from entry-level to advanced-level. We have them all at the website, with the corresponding videos of James teaching these texts available too. Watch as many as you can. Entry-level are: *Tattva Bodh*, *Aparoksanubhuti*; entry- to mid-level: *Bhagavad Gita* and *The Yoga of Love (Narada Bkakti Sutras)*; advanced-level: *Panchadasa (Inquiry into Existence)*. Also, make use of the e-satsang section at the website, as it is a major resource of all the questions and answers you could think of.

Memory plays an important function in the assimilation (learning) of knowledge, especially at the beginning of self-inquiry. We recommend that the inquirer memorizes all the main terms and teachings, developing a thorough understanding of the terminology and how words are used, what they are meant to mean, not how one interprets them. Memorizing also means understanding some of the Sanskrit terms which do not have good English equivalents. For inquirers who have realised the self but not actualised self-knowledge yet, it is equally important to remember the teachings so that whatever appears in the mind can be dissolved in the knowledge.

However, it is important to understand that there is a fundamental difference in learning about objects and self-knowledge. Learning about objects requires repetition and memorizing. Self-knowledge cannot be studied, because the subject matter is you. The whole point of self-inquiry is to understand the mind and the environment it is a part of in the light of self-knowledge (not the other way around), and to negate the doer. So while the "learner" is useful at first to understand the language and terminology Vedanta uses, it is not by learning or memorizing that self-knowledge obtains in the mind. It is by negating the doer/learner that self-knowledge obtains in a purified mind.

Vedanta offers direct knowledge using the implied meaning of words unfolded through a particular methodology, which is the tradition of Vedanta. This

methodology provides a valid means of knowledge, a toolkit, as it were, with which to unpack one's life in the light of self-knowledge, not in the light of one's (or anyone else's) opinions. Unfortunately, the way language is used is so open to interpretation, misinterpretation and the contamination of one's own conditioning that it is very often the greatest source of misunderstandings. Vedanta is called a *sabda pramana*, the oral or spoken testimony of competent witnesses, meaning that the words are time-tested, impersonal and they work to remove ignorance IF the mind is qualified, has negated the doer and is ready to hear the truth

If your desire for *moksa* is stronger than any other desire, then you have to commit 100% to self-inquiry. I would advise that you reread (or keep reading) James' book *The Essence of Enlightenment* carefully, as it unfolds a particular methodology which must be followed for self-knowledge to obtain. Each chapter presents the next stage of self-inquiry – the teachings are progressive. There is a 12-month teaching course that corresponds to *Essence* at the ShiningWorld website, which I recommend you follow. It has corresponding questions and answers relevant to each chapter. Go slowly, don't rush. Sign on to the logic and don't skip.

**Lulu:** But there is still something unclear to me: How to do *karma yoga* constantly?

**Sundari:** The whole point of *karma yoga* is to negate the doer – the one “doing” *karma yoga* or anything else. If *moksa* is a burning desire, *karma yoga* is an attitude you take towards action. It is the only way to negate the doer and to lessen the pressure of the *vasanas*.

**Lulu:** I mean, what does it look like during the day?

**Sundari:** *Karma yoga* does not look like anything. As stated above, *karma yoga* is an attitude one takes towards actions and their results. It seems you do not understand what *karma yoga* is.

*Karma yoga* does not say that you have to stop doing – even if you could, which, as the *jiva*, you cannot. Even not doing is a doing. *Karma yoga* is: (1) consecrating every thought, word and deed before you speak or act to *Isvara*, the Field of Existence, which is to say to the self, whether or not you see that both the person and the Field of Existence share a common identity with you, awareness. It is an attitude based on the understanding that life is a great gift that requires reciprocation – and, with this attitude, we renounce the IDEA of doership, not necessarily the action.

(2) It is the knowledge that the results of any action are not up to me, the *jiva*. All results are up to the Field of Existence, or *Isvara*. *Karma yoga* means responding appropriately to what life asks on a moment-to-moment basis. If you are still feeling agitation, disappointment and frustration, it means you have not surrendered the results, and therefore cannot take what results that do come as *prasad*, because you are still invested in getting what you want or avoiding what you don't want. It's that simple.

What this means is that we can take action to gain a given result (which may or may not give us what we want), but whether we like it or not, the Field of Existence alone determines the result. It is possible to take the right action with the right attitude

and still get a result we do not want because the Field of Existence, or *Isvara*, considers the needs of the whole before it takes our individual needs into account. However, we can maximize the chances of getting a positive result with appropriate and timely actions.

How we relate to results determines how peaceful our mind is. If we are very attached to the idea of getting what we want (strong likes and dislikes), life will soon prove to us that we lose as much as we win, maybe more. At best we will be happy half the time and unhappy the other half. More likely though, when one is driven by likes and dislikes, the mind is agitated whether or not we get what we want, because nothing ever really satisfies the mind for long, other than self-knowledge. It is the contention of Vedanta that happiness is our true nature and exists independently of winning or losing. Actualising this knowledge is freedom.

The action itself can never fail us; it only produces results. A given expectation may be said to have failed, but the one with the expectation has not failed. That I have failed or that the action has failed is the wrong conclusion; the expectation is the problem. So nobody fails. As the *jiva*, it is only a matter of bad judgment because we are not omniscient and we cannot have the knowledge of all the factors that shape the results of the actions. Only *Isvara* is omniscient. Action can produce likes and dislikes (*vasanas*) only if we see the result as a success or failure.

When I see the result as a function of the immutable laws of action or what is even better if I see it as the grace of the Field of Existence, no new likes and dislikes are created, and I maintain peace of mind. With this attitude towards results, actions born of likes and dislikes become the means of eliminating the likes and dislikes. The mind becomes free from the agitations of elation (*rajas*) and depression (*tamas*). Such a mind is tranquil and contemplative.

If peace of mind is the aim, taking whatever results that do come as a gift will be the attitude one brings to everything. Sameness of mind (towards success and failure) concerning action is another definition of *karma yoga* and is the essence of peace of mind, *sattva*. In cultivating the right attitude toward life, one performs one's duty by conforming to the pattern and harmony of creation, and thus one becomes alive to the beauty of the cosmic order. When the mind becomes clear, one can see the order. At the beginning of our spiritual practice, *karma yoga* is an attitude we have to cultivate, but eventually it is simply knowledge, so becomes natural.

**Lulu:** Do I have to be constantly with my thoughts of God, giving *Isvara* every kind of action?

**Sundari:** If you want to be free, yes, indeed. Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom – NO fine print. See above.

**Lulu:** Even when I'm *rajas/tamas*?

**Sundari:** YOU are never *rajas* or *tamas*. *Rajas* and *tamas* do not belong to the *jiva*. It only seems like they belong to the *jiva* because there is always a corresponding story that comes with them. The *gunas* belong to *Isvara* and have nothing to do with awareness or with the person. All the *gunas* originate from the unconscious, or causal body (*Isvara*), and are what give rise to and govern everything in the

apparent reality – which includes “your” *vasanas*. The *gunas* are only a problem if you do not understand what they are, how they play out or if you identify with them, such as you have done in your statement above. *Karma yoga* is especially important when you observe *rajas* and *tamas* playing out in the mind. To repeat: IF what you desire most is peace of mind, *karma yoga* is about responding appropriately to what *Isvara* presents to the mind on a moment-to-moment basis.

**Lulu:** Right now I have only some slots of the day which are *sattva*; most of the time I’m *rajas* and in the evening *tamas*. Some glimpses of the truth are there, but they are very short. The “working world,” to-do lists and the “world of the computer” makes me easily *rajas* and *tamas* again. So how is it possible to practice *karma yoga* constantly, being most of the time *sattva*?

**Sundari:** The aim of self-inquiry is peace of mind. *Sattva* is the true nature of the mind when it is not obscured by *rajas* and *tamas*. You cannot gain more *sattva*, because you cannot become “more” conscious. You can only lose ignorance through self-knowledge. Self-inquiry is not something you do at certain times of the day. It is how you live your life. If the spiritual practices that Vedanta teach do not translate into how you live your life, what use is self-knowledge to the *jiva*? Self-inquiry is the hardest thing the mind will ever be subjected to. It is not a magic wand that will instantly transform the mind. You have to keep at it, never giving up.

The *gunas* are programmed ways of thinking and acting. They are totally predictable. All the *gunas* build on themselves, so *rajas* will create more *rajas*, as will *tamas* create more *tamas* and *sattva* more *sattva*. The *gunas* all work together, and at any given time one of them will predominate. *Rajas* and *tamas* are inseparable. I call them the “terrible twins.” James calls them “incestuous bedfellows.” For instance, when *rajas* is operating, the mind will be projecting outwards and *tamas* will be right there to deny it. They are just the programs that run the individual (and everything else).

Remember, you are the knower of the person; therefore you are the knower of the *gunas*. Whenever you find yourself saying “I” press pause and ask yourself: “Who is talking here, which perspective am I identified with: the reflected self (the person) or me, awareness?” If you can consistently do this, it will change your life forever.

All three *gunas* have an upside as well as a downside, as does everything in this apparent reality. *Rajas* and *tamas* are only a problem when they are out of balance with *sattva*. Without *rajas*, you would never get out of bed in the morning or accomplish anything. *Rajas* is the active, creative “force.” It is the mode of passion and desire. Not all desire or passion is bad, however; you need a passion for self-inquiry, and a strong desire for *moksa*. It is one of the qualifications. *Tamas* is the very substance of matter, a heavy and steady energy. Without it you would not be capable of endurance. You would not have the staying power to complete anything and would more or less float off the planet. You would not be “earthed” – and you would never be able to sleep. Everyone has a particular *guna* profile, usually with one or two dominant *gunas*. With too much *sattva* you can get stuck in a golden cage of experiential bliss, thinking happiness is the Holy Grail and that you are quite special.

**Is it Self-Inquiry or a Spiritual Lifestyle?**

Many spiritual seekers are looking for a way to cope with their unresolved psychological issues or as a balm to salve their emotional wounds. Often they have the vanity to think they are pure and holy because they have had some kind of transcendental spiritual experiences or because they have walked away from a *samsaric* life when their “renunciation” is actually escapism. They build a “spiritual” identity that makes them feel less small and afraid. This is one of the negative effects of *sattva*. Being “spiritual” becomes a lifestyle.

## **How to Manage the *Gunas***

As stated above, understanding the *gunas* means gaining the knowledge that everything in the environment is created by and governed by them, including “your” conditioning. Everything that arises in the mind is a product of the *gunas*, meaning the causal body (the unconscious in psychology), or *Isvara*. Other than gaining the knowledge of what the *gunas* are and how they operate, which is half the battle won, you can do a great deal to manage them through self-knowledge. This means that you know that there are appropriate actions to maintain peace of mind for the *jiva*.

## **Practical Lifestyle Management**

Take a look at your lifestyle and change what you can. Diet is very important for *guna* management. Learn which foods cause which *guna*. Examine what you do for a living, how you recreate, spend money and exercise. Stop hoarding unwanted “stuff” (psychological and otherwise). Examine your relationships with people. Don’t keep company with highly *rajasic* or *tamasic* people. Or, if you can’t avoid them, see how the *gunas* run them. See where they want things to be different and the pain it causes. People can’t help being true to their predominant *guna* when they are unaware that there is choice. Take a fearless moral inventory of what you value most, as well as an objective view of the kind of thoughts that dominate the mind. Even knowing that thoughts do not come from you, one still has to dissolve thoughts in light of self-knowledge. The practice of seeing how the *gunas* operate in yourself and “others” will put you in a whole new world of perception. Of course there really are no “others,” as there is only one self with three *guna*-manufactured bodies. By that I mean that they work the same way in everyone. The *gunas* run the show for everyone who is identified with the body-mind and the story of personhood.

If the effects of ignorance are playing out (*prarabdha karma*) and you cannot change it, accept it. Don’t resist. Do what you can to ameliorate the effects with equanimity and through *dharmic* lifestyle choices. Know that it is not you and it will pass; this is what *Isvara* is bringing your way as the *jiva* and you must flow with it. Resistance keeps you tied to the person and is a guarantee of more suffering. The *gunas* are constantly changing and impersonal, like everything else in the apparent reality; what use is control? *Karma yoga* is the only solution, as there is no way to fast-forward this process.

## **Following *Dharma***

The knowledge of how the *gunas* function alleviates existential pain and guilt, and gives you x-ray vision into yourself and everyone else. It shows that no one is doing anything – or ever has. You can stop blaming yourself or anyone else for anything you did or anything that happened “to” you. Those who think that they are doers

have no choice but to follow their natures. When you know you are not the doer, you can choose to drop “your” story. This is not to say you do not take appropriate action when required or that you would do harm to any part of the creation. You would naturally make choices that give peace of mind (*sattva*) and cause no injury, not because you feel guilt or duty-bound, but because peace of mind is your primary goal.

If your predominant *guna* is *tamas*, clean out your cupboards; give away everything you don't really need, stop staying up late or getting up late, stop eating *tamasic* foods, get some exercise. Educate yourself about proper nutrition. *Guna* management is just common sense. Avoid depressants such as alcohol, sleeping pills and drugs. Be constantly on the alert for denial of any kind.

If the dominant *guna* is *rajas*, be on constant alert for mindless activity, aggression, arrogance, projection, desire and extroversion. *Rajas* and *tamas* are the real problem-makers. Check your diet. Too much sugar, coffee and other stimulants exacerbate *rajas* and induce it. So do many over-the-counter as well as prescription medications. More than half the planet seems to be on some kind of tranquilizer, and it is not hard to see why. James says that *rajas* is the disease of the 21st century.

If you observe too much *sattva*, stop pretending that you are “special” because you have “out of this world” epiphanies, spiritual knowledge and lots of bliss. Or stop pretending that you are very holy because you meditate, chant for hours or have an enlightened *guru* (or worse, that you think you are an enlightened *guru*). Or you think you have the moral high ground because you are a vegan/vegetarian and live on sprouts. The point here is that everyone has a predominant *guna* which will not only create their most entrenched tendencies (i.e. *vasanas*), but it will also be what has conditioned them to have a particular kind of nature. There is no right or wrong here, no better or worse. We do not make ourselves the way we are; *Isvara* – the *gunas* – do. The “work” involved in self-inquiry is identifying the *gunas* through self-knowledge and allowing the knowledge to help “you” manage the *gunas* by dis-identifying from them and standing as awareness.

## **You Can Choose the *Guna***

Once you find yourself acting a particular *guna* out, just observe what is going on. As a person you have relative free will to choose what action to take to achieve a desired result, and thus success in the world is possible. One can make “the best of one's life” as a *jiva*. However, those choices themselves are determined by your conditioning, i.e. *Isvara*, or the *gunas*. Don't judge or beat yourself up; be dispassionate about whatever is going on – it's a movie after all. Trace back the train of events, thoughts and feelings to their source and identify what triggered them.

The practice of knowledge, the “work,” is keeping an eye on the person and his/her likes and dislikes. Make a note of the *guna* and adjust it in light of the kind of mind you are trying to create. Make peace of mind your aim at all costs. Each time you do this, it will get easier to manage the *gunas* and it will be easier to recognise them quicker when they appear as your likes and dislikes. Consider the likes and dislikes appearing in your mind as red flags, ways to identify the *vasanas* that keep a particular program running.

It is like playing a computer game: although it appears as if you are making the moves, all the moves that are possible are already programmed into the game. If

you keep up the practice of knowledge, before long you will have deactivated the like or dislike that keeps the program running. It will no longer condition the subtle body, although it may still appear. You will no longer be a robot acting out unconscious motives by reacting to your environment. If the *vasana* is still there but you do not have to act on it, it is considered non-binding. As stated above: understanding the *guna* teaching means that you understand the nature of your environment (meaning *Isvara*), which includes you as a *jiva*. It is also important to remember that it is impossible and unnecessary to deactivate all *vasanas*. Not all *vasanas* are bad; you need a *vasana* for self inquiry and another to motivate yourself. As long as a *vasana* is not causing excessive agitation in the mind, it is not necessarily *adharmic*.

### **A Fearless Moral Inventory**

Conduct a fearless inventory of your likes and dislikes and see which *guna* values they represent. Be totally honest, without shame, blame or fear as you investigate what you are invested in. Be really alert, like a sharp bird with an acute monocular vision; witness the person you think you are and what goes on in his/her mind and life.

**Lulu:** I'm happy about any tip! 😊

~ Much love, Lulu

**Sundari:** *Om* and *prem*.